

THE TROUBLE WITH TURNING DOWN THE VOLUME

Sunday, December 13, 2009
Zephaniah 3:14–20, Luke 3:7-18

Hope Church
Rev. Wendy Miller Olapade

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance." And on he goes....

A seminary classmate of mine, used to say: "*John! John, John, John, John, Chill Out! This is supposed to be the Good News you're proclaiming? 'Brood of vipers'? Some tidings of comfort and joy that is!*"

John the Baptist. He is pretty unbelievable. All signs point to his being a madman. I mean, think about it. Hairy suit, Locust diet...He's got an ax! Not only that, but he's going to use it! Where? At "the root of the trees." This isn't trimming we are doing here; we are razing the forest!

"Don't plan on just lopping off a few dead branches. No, the whole tree has got to go! " According to John, God wants to plant an entirely different species on your plot of land.

"You can't hang a wreath on the door to spruce things up. Down with the house, bring in the wrecking ball!" According to John, God plans on rebuilding from the ground up.

If this sounds extreme to you, join the club. If you're thinking John just isn't in the holiday spirit, you are right. And he's not going to be getting in the holiday spirit any time soon. There will not come a point when John the Baptist settles down, gives us a polite smile, and passes the eggnog. He belongs to Advent, and he will not be rushing Christmas.

Isn't the tension in keeping Advent enormous? The pressure is on: give in and get the tree up! Play the Christmas music already! And of course, people just don't understand you when you try to explain why you aren't. Keeping Advent seems to get more and more difficult every year. This year--with Thanksgiving weekend falling so late... the stores were decorated weeks before December and the all Christmas Music radio stations were in place by mid November.

The rest of the world is decking the halls, and we're looking for purple candles for the advent wreath. The rest of the world is at the mall, and we're being harangued by a first-century revivalist with a deadly weapon. My seminary friend says it's "Tidings of Comfort and Joy," versus "Flee from the Wrath to Come."

Good old John the Baptist turns up like this every year, both the second and the third Sundays of Advent. Just when society is bubbling over with chestnuts and cheer, rumors of angels, heartwarming tales on the TV, and a different holiday choral concert every night; Just when they've started wishing you Merry Christmas at the Jiffy-Lube, and you start to think about bringing out the decorations at home--you walk into church, two weeks in a row and encounter the Brood of Vipers Guy.

But whatever the rest of the country is doing, John keeps on keeping Advent, telling us exactly what we don't want to hear, and doing it with a total, fixated conviction that means one of two things: either he's nuts, or he's got us pegged.

And yet...there's one sure sign that John the Baptist has gotten under someone's skin. We see it three times in today's Gospel. The crowds: "What, then, should we do?" The tax collectors: "Teacher, what should we do?" The soldiers: " And we, what should we do?" One after the other, people hear themselves blurting out that question. If this guy is for real, then something's got to change here. "What now, John? What happens next?"

And if you're like me, even if you he has smoothed out some rough places for you at Costco, once he starts in on this repentance thing, John the Baptist catches you by surprise. You get that terrified feeling in the pit of your stomach that maybe this time around you'll actually have to take him seriously and change your life. You feel, welling up inside you, that question people always ask when John the Baptist has gotten to them: " And *me*. ..what should *I* do?"

That's one of the sure signs that God's tidings have gotten through to you un-muffled--you respond from the gut. It gets you where you live.

The repentance that the Baptizer's talking about not some narrow understanding linked to sin – but rather a broad meaning reflected in the translation of the word: “a change of mind” or “going beyond the mind you have.” Repentance depicts a change of life and heart evidenced in action as well as attitude. John associates repentance with “bearing fruit,” a synonym in Jewish wisdom literature for one's actions.

The beneficiary of John's message is not just the Messiah whose way he prepares. The beneficiaries of repentance will be those provided with warm clothing or food. They will be those previously cheated or bullied. They will be those whose lives are transformed by the fruit we bear when we go beyond the mind we have. The Spirit works through acts of justice and compassion, as well as acts of refraining from injustice, to prepare the way for Messiah and God's realm.

Do you feel it? In the pit of your stomach? This time around I am going to have to take him seriously and change my life. Do you feel it, welling up inside you, that question people always ask when John the Baptist has gotten to them: " And *me*. ..what should *I* do?"

Ah....But then the fourth copy this season of the L. L. Bean catalog comes, and flipping through it, just for laughs, you get caught up in picking out a polo shirt. Or you start to scan the rightly named *Self* magazine. "Hey, this month's issue is called *Your Spiritual Life!* How bad can it be? Or, you log on to do some last minute shopping, and you really do have to get those hotel reservations made and finish the Christmas card list and bake a few things for the Cookie Swap.

And afterwards it's too late in the evening to do any serious thinking anyway.

And the ax is blunted, the wilderness voice muffled. But not without a price. If we muffle God when God speaks to us in one way, then God's voice invariably gets muffled elsewhere in our lives as well. Knowing God isn't a pick-and-choose affair. Turn down the volume on one part of the Gospel, and the whole thing gets quieter, less compelling. If we never let ourselves be compelled by prophetic passion, the rest of the passionate Gospel of love will get turned down too.

With the volume down, when Zephaniah cries from the lectern, "*Sing out, rejoice and exult with all your hearts,*" or Isaiah shouts in the canticle, "*Cry aloud, O Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in your midst is the Holy One of Israel,* " the words will sound remote, too muffled to make a difference. The reactions of those who hear it loud and clear will seem a tad extreme. We will do something reserved and decorous, instead of exulting with all our hearts or crying aloud in praise before the Lord.

And let me tell you that if we lower the volume on God's Advent voice, it stays down when Christmas comes. And we miss the fact that eventually, sure enough, the tidings John proclaims do turn into the tidings of comfort and joy.

They have to. They are the harbingers of Christ, the Lord of Life become flesh for us. The God who created us comes to re-create us, to make bags of flesh and bone into partakers of the divine nature. The only real tidings of comfort and joy are the tidings of Jesus, the whole Jesus, the crucial and complex Savior to whom John points the way.

There aren't two Christs, one the sweet infant and the other the thresher and winnowing of chaff. The cherubic crèche child is the same as the baptizer with spirit and fire. We can't listen to the one we like and turn down the volume on the other. No, the Christ for whom we wait this season is one. His message is one. His love is one. And they're like John the Baptist in at least this way: with the volume up, they'll get you where you live.

Resources: Rev. Beth Maynard, sermon from 1999.